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In service to the town

Jay Polke has dedicated his life to community efforts

See story on page 15

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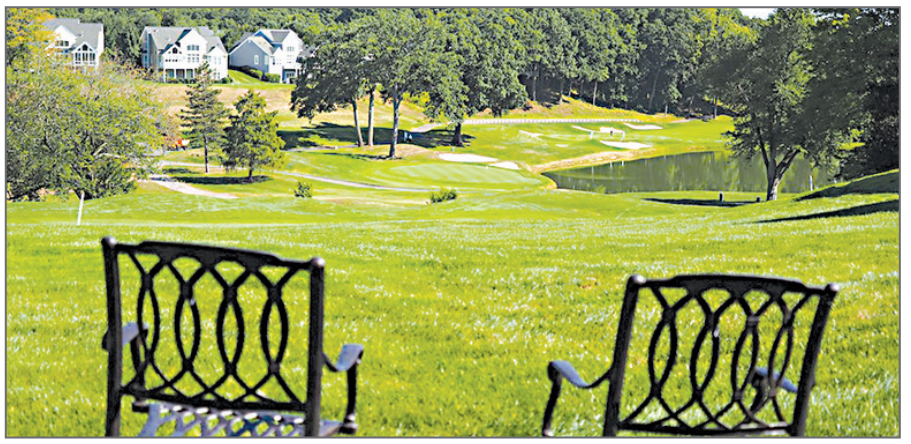

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QUOTE OF NOTE:

"As a teacher, you always try to give your students real life skills." - *Briana O'Leary*

See story page 8

ON THE COVER

Jay Polke, owner and co-founder of Willowbrook Spirit Shoppe, is involved in many community and charitable endeavors in Cromwell and Middlesex County.

Photo by Lisa Brisson
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Bruce and Lorrie Huffaker pose with some of the equipment they have collected as Chair Corps representatives of Joni and Friends Wheels for the World. The equipment will be refurbished and distributed to the needy in foreign countries.

Courtesy photo

'An expression of God's love'

Couple collects wheelchairs for the needy people overseas

by Mara Dresner
Staff Writer

Using a walker or wheelchair to get around might be a bit inconvenient now and again, but imagine if one needed such a device and none was available.

Lorrie and Bruce Huffaker of Cromwell are Chair Corps representatives of Joni and Friends Wheels for the World. It is an organization that collects used wheelchairs and other assistive devices from across the United States that are then restored to like-new conditions by inmates at prison-based wheelchair restoration centers.

The devices are then shipped around the world to those who would otherwise not be able to afford such equipment.

"We're the worker bees. We go around and collect the wheelchairs and other mobility devices," Lorrie said. "We actually heard about it many years ago when we were high school aged from the church we grew up in, long before we were married, in upstate New York."

The couple, who knew each other from church and school while growing up in Manlius, N.Y., joined Wheels for the World as volunteers this past August. They got involved through Cindy and Marshall Dunbar of Meriden, the Connecticut coordinators for Wheels for the World. All four attend First Congregational Church in Cromwell.

"We were just picking up a cane here and there or a chair here and there and bringing it to church. They invited us to become Chair Corps [representatives] and we joined Joni and Friends Wheels for the World. They're based in California and they give you all sorts of support on how to collect chairs and some procedures. They're very formal about it," Lorrie said.

"They provide mobility devices to people overseas who otherwise would probably not be able to function or have any kind of life outside their homes. This allows them to go out of their homes to go to school or work and be part of society. It makes a huge difference in the lives of these people who are disabled."

As of Dec. 1, the Huffakers arranged for a drop-off bin at the town transfer station. They will also pick up devices at people's homes. Cindy Dunbar said the Huffakers made an impact on her and her husband from the start.

"We met them at our church. We were impressed with how they exude a quiet strength. Bruce created a demonstration video of the Wheels for the World process. They embraced the ministry and started bringing mobility equipment to the church, the collection site at that time," she said.

"We have seen them grow in the ministry. They have shown creativity in promoting the collection process and innovative action. A perfect example is their getting the Cromwell transfer station to allow them to set up a bin for people to leave mobility equipment in.

"They collect items a couple times each week. It saves these items from being part of the landfills and helps those who refurbish them and the recipients of the equipment. The Huffakers have become very valuable members of the Connecticut team," she said.

The wheelchairs are stored at a warehouse in Seymour and taken to a prison in Cheshire to be refurbished. Lorrie, a retired occupational therapist, said they've seen the difference the right equipment makes in their own lives.

"Bruce's mom and my dad both used wheelchairs in their older years and Bruce's mom for longer than that. We saw first hand the difference that the right mobility equipment makes in a person's life," she said.

"There are people who are literally dragging themselves across the dirt without having any kind of device to help them," Bruce added. "It's something we could do that would help people that we don't even know."

When the equipment is shipped overseas, the recipients receive more than just a piece of technology.

"There's a whole program with physical and occupational therapists so they're fitted and people are instructed in how to care for them," Lorrie said.

In their first month or so as their own Chair Corps, the Huffakers collected seven wheelchairs, a dozen walkers, as well as canes and crutches.

"The primary objective is mainly wheelchairs. Whatever it is we do collect, they have to be metal, not wooden," Bruce said.

"We are letting people who are desperate know that others care about them and that God cares about them."

– Lorrie Huffaker

That's because metal is longer lasting and the wood would rot in a number of climates.

"We have such an amazing community in Cromwell filled with so many caring people like the Huffakers. Taking time to collect the walkers, canes and other items to help those in need is such a wonderful gesture," Mayor Enzo Faienza said.

"It shows amazing spirit and compassion and they are making a difference for those who are less fortunate. I'm so proud of them and thankful to both of them for all their efforts."

They coincidentally purchased a truck that serves them well in carting around the wheelchairs.

"We just decided after we retired that we should have a truck. Bruce looked online and we bought it. Soon after, we started getting more involved with this. We can put 10 wheelchairs in it," Lorrie said.

She added that pretty much everything is donated, from warehouse space to trucking services.

"It's amazing what people donate," she said.

The amount of time they spend on the project varies. Some weeks, it might be minimal, while others they can spend entire days working on the project. She said they would welcome volunteers to help out.

The couple see a spiritual side to the work they do.

"Some people call it being the hands and feet of Jesus. When people receive these things, they say, 'Why did you bring them to us?' We say, 'That's what God wants us to do with our lives is be a blessing to you," Lorrie said.

"We are letting people who are desperate know that others care about them and that God cares about them. I think if you're stuck in a terrible situation, you feel very lonely as if there's no help at all. [This is about] finding out someone cares about you and God cares about you," she added.

Bruce cites Matthew 25:40: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

"The world is so crazy that it just feels good that there is something tangible you can do. So often we feel helpless or hopeless that we can't do anything," he said. "Plus it's just an expression of God's love for people." CL

Contact Bruce and Lorrie Huffaker at 860-635-4746 or bchuffaker@gmail.com. Learn more or donate at joniandfriends.org. The transfer station is located at 100 County Line Drive and is open Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

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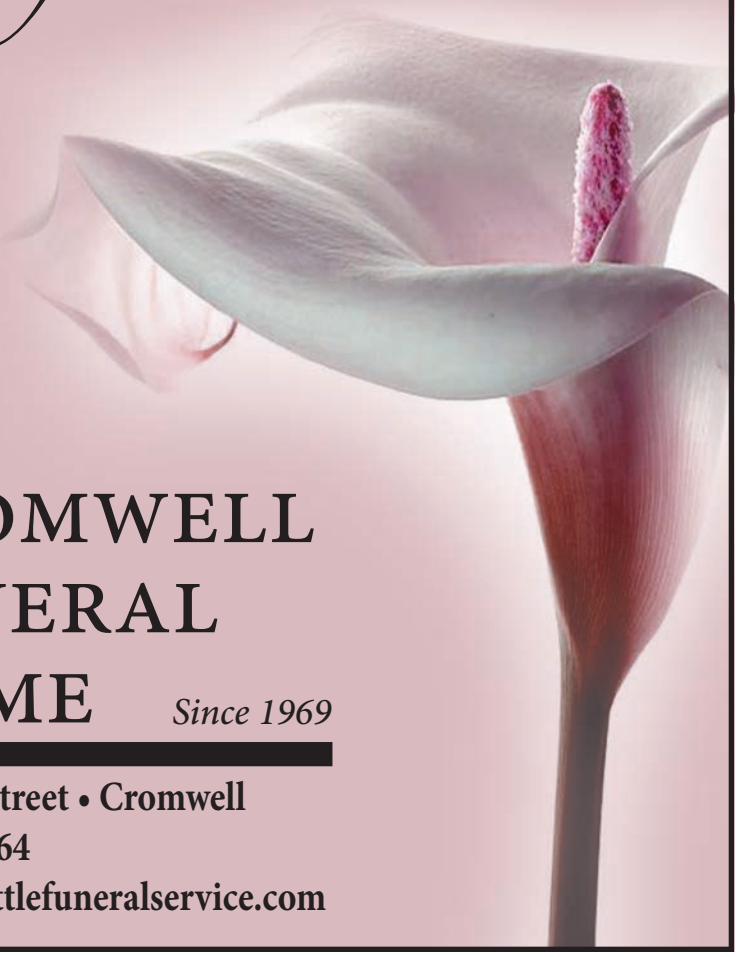

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Students of the month

Woodside pair are the leaders of the pack

by Allie Rivera
Staff Writer

Students are encouraged to become leaders at Woodside Intermediate School. The new multiage classrooms have helped to push many of them in that direction.

A pair of fifth grade students, 10-year-olds Mitchell Botelho and Emily Kowalski, have used their two years within the same classroom to demonstrate to their teachers and their peers how to become a leader and a role model.

"They both have a really positive attitude in class," multiage teacher Courtney Chenkus said. "It's wonderful to be able to see the positive results of this."

Academics are important to both students. Mitchell's favorite subject is math, where he and his classmates are learning about multiplying and dividing decimals.

"Next we're going into fractions more and learning how to simplify fractions," he said. "I like it a lot because it's probably my best subject. I think it's one of the most fun subjects, besides recess and lunch."

Outside of the classroom, Mitchell stays active as an athlete. During the winter and spring seasons, he plays basketball and baseball. He hopes to play basketball for a travel team next year.

His favorite sport is soccer and he plays it throughout the year.

"I've been playing probably since preschool," he said. "I usually play midfield or striker."

Mitchell plays on the Cromwell travel team and hopes to continue with soccer as much as possible.

"I like playing sports because

Photo by Allie Rivera

Ten-year-olds Emily Kowalski, left, and Mitchell Botelho are dedicated students and athletes, but their teachers say it is their leadership skills that have earned them recognition.

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they're fun and I like being outside and active. Even when it's indoors for soccer, I like getting to run around," he said.

During his free time, he enjoys being outside with his friends playing Capture the Flag or Manhunt after the sun goes down. He also enjoys spending time in the pool at his home or on his family's boat.

"My neighbor has a trampoline, so sometimes we'll go over there and play trampoline soccer," he said, describing a made-up sport that combines the two.

Family is also important. He has two twin younger brothers, Ethan and Mason, 6, and Mitchell tries to spend time with them whenever possible.

"I like to teach them about basketball and soccer," he said.

According to Mitchell's teachers, his academic and athletic accomplishments are admirable, but it is his personality and kindness toward others that sets him apart.

"Mitchell is just the epitome of a problem solver," teacher Alyssa Frohlinger said. "He's an extremely hard worker and an excellent friend. He's been a real mentor to the fourth-graders from the first day of school."

Emily has similarly demonstrated a passion for helping others in her own classroom.

"We wanted to encourage the fifth-graders to be leaders and role models for the younger group and Emily was one of the students who really took that to the next level," Chenkus said. "She's a positive role model."

Emily's favorite academic subject is reading.

"We're doing nonfiction right now," she said. "I was reading about Ellis Island, but now I'm reading about wildfires."

She also reads during her free time and said that her favorite book is "Wonder" by R.J. Palacio.

"It's about a boy who is different from everyone and he's going into a new school," she said.

When not in school, Emily stays active with basketball in the winter, lacrosse in the spring and playing on two soccer teams year round.

"I just love it," she said. "I like meeting new friends every year."

One of the soccer teams is a premier league based out of Middletown called Sporting.

When not running down the court or across the field, Emily spends time singing in a local choir that performs at churches throughout the area. She's been with the group for nearly four years and takes singing lessons to improve her skills.

She enjoys spending time with her friends.

"I have a zip line in my back yard so we like to go on that," she said. "Or sometimes we'll just hang out and play sports."

Along with being with friends, Emily also spends time with her two younger brothers, 8-year-old Matthew and 5-year-old Tommy.

"They will come to my soccer games and I'll go to their basketball games," she said.

Her teacher said it is Emily's positive attitude that makes her a top student.

"She always has a smile on her face," Chenkus said. "It's great to walk into a classroom and see her there."

"We've had the pleasure of having them for two years in a row. It's been great to watch how they've grown into true leaders."

– Courtney Chenkus

Being able to be in a classroom for two years has helped both students develop their skills as leaders and it's also had a positive outcome for the teachers they see every day.

"We've had the pleasure of having them for two years in a row," Chenkus said. "It's been great to watch how they've grown into true leaders." CL

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LIFE in the classroom

Changemakers ignite a spark

by Allie Rivera
Staff Writer

At Woodside Intermediate School, the only thing needed to incite change is one little spark. That's the message a small group of teachers is passing along to their students as the pilot effort for the Changemakers program.

The initiative is being taken through a group called Ashoka, a global organization that identifies and invests in social entrepreneurs. The Changemakers Schools Network is composed of a community of elementary, middle and high schools that prioritize empathy, teamwork, leadership, problem solving and "changemaking" as student outcomes.

"There's really a great focus on empathy and getting our kids to see the difference they can make," fifth grade teacher Suzy Kassan said. "We're showing them that the people who made big changes when they were adults started with small changes when they were young."

This program came to town after people from Changemakers contacted the Capitol Region Education Council about their work. After members of CREC spoke to Superintendent of Schools Dr. Paula Talty, a small group of teachers at Woodside stepped forward to launch the program.

"It's not really a program that you strictly have to follow. You get to use this how it best works for you and your classroom," Kassan said. "We're still doing our reading and writing as before, we're just shifting the lens of social change."

The Changemakers program challenges teachers to focus on empathy and kindness in their lessons, often through opening students' eyes to world events.

"We've been having them read news articles from Newsela, which is an age-appropriate news site," Kassan said. "We're exposing them to different things that are going on in the country and in the world."

Many of the involved classrooms read articles about the Detroit Public Schools crisis, where teachers walked out, closing down schools, in protest of unsafe building conditions.

"When we talked about the Detroit Public Schools crisis, you could hear a pin drop," fifth grade teacher Micaela Rafferty said.

"When I first started doing the news articles with them, I had to keep reminding them that this was all happening right now," Kassan added. "They're so used to reading about things that they think happened a long time ago."

The teachers said they are frequently impressed with how their students respond to learning about such events and hope that more adults will be willing to have these kind of frank conversations with

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their children.

"For a lot of us, this is why we went into teaching," multiage teacher Alyssa Frohlinger said. "It's building that knowledge base and empowering them to talk about it and understand it appropriately."

"We have given them only a small taste of what's going on around the world, but you should hear their conversations. It's electric," Rafferty added.

Knowing that some topics may be more challenging for certain ages, the teachers use their best judgement on what to cover.

"We've definitely tiered it to the grade level," third grade teacher Emily Prestley said. "Third-graders are focusing more on general empathy, then they learn about problems in the school and it grows from there."

Those third grade students have already started to take the lessons they're learning from Changemakers and put them into practice. Students collectively addressed their teachers about a problem they had been experiencing in the lunch room.

While eating, students in the fourth grade who were outside during recess would often knock on the windows in a teasing manner toward the younger pupils. Instead of taking matters into their own hands, the teachers let the students decide how to address the problem.

"As a teacher, you always try to give your students real life skills."

– Briana O'Leary

"All together, they created PowerPoint presentations for the fourth-graders and then went and presented it to them," third grade teacher Briana O'Leary said. "They also thought, well maybe the fourth-graders tap on the glass because they're bored, so they created posters of different things they could do instead of staring at the third-graders, and hung those in the window."

O'Leary said those efforts were successful.

"I got a lot of positive feedback from the fourth grade teachers and some of the fourth-graders themselves," she said. "The kids felt so empowered. They felt like they're really solving problems."

That idea of empowerment is one of the key goals of the Changemakers program. When students feel capable of tackling problems, they feel inspired to do more.

"It's empowering them," Frohlinger said. "They're seeing that they, at their age, can really make a difference."

The Changemakers program focuses a great deal on the idea of a spark, that little bit of passion that will make students want to work for change, be it now or in the future.

"I think that the end goal is for them to take that spark with them," multiage teacher Courtney Chenkus said. "We're giving them the seeds for something greater to come."

"Part of the beauty is that it can affect each student on a different level," Prestley added. "If they all take away a little bit of empathy, the world will be a better place."

With this pilot program fully underway, other members of the school community are interested in seeing how Changemakers could expand.

"We've seen the changes it can make already so we're currently planning the next step," Principal Christopher Butwill said. "We're piloting it on a smaller scale and figuring out how to implement that throughout the building."

For the teachers currently involved, seeing the change in their students has been a motivating force in keeping the Changemakers program going.

"As a teacher, you always try to give your students real life skills," O'Leary said. "Now I can help them make not only an academic change, but a social change." **CL**

For more information on the Changemakers program visit startempathy.org.

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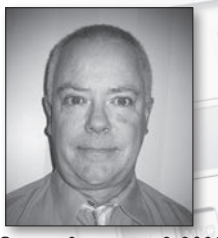

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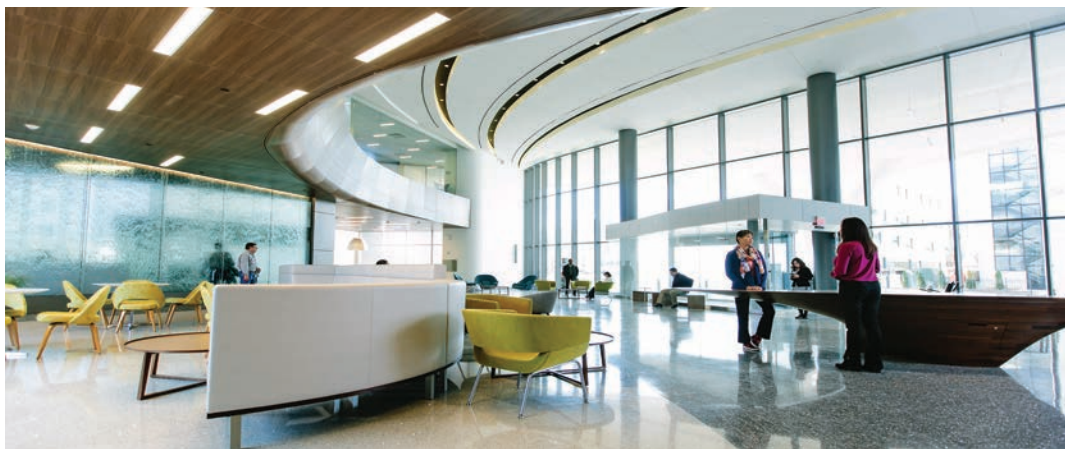

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LIFE *in the kitchen with chef Peggi Camosci of Tea Roses Tea Room*

by Mara Dresner
Staff Writer

Photo by Mara Dresner

Peggi Camosci relaxes with a cup of the special house blend at her Tea Roses Tea Room.

As a child, if Peggi Camosci wanted a homemade treat, she knew she would have to find her own way.

"I was always interested in baking. My mother was not a baker so if I wanted baked goods I had to learn to do it myself, which I did," she recalled.

"I did a lot of cookies. I had an old friend's family recipe for chocolate cinnamon cake with frosting that I used to make for my family, and all the muffins. I loved Home Ec, and back then, it was called Home Ec, in junior high school.

"I prepared meals. I used to like to surprise them and make a meal for them. I've always been a very self-sufficient person. I would say I like the idea that I can do for myself and produce tasty things for myself and not have to rely on anyone. I think that's what was so intriguing to me," she said.

"My father was a picky eater," she added. "He was very specific. He came home from work and dinner had to be on the table at 4:30. [My mother] had four children. I don't think it was joyful for her. It turned into something joyful for me."

Despite her love of cooking, she didn't pursue it as a career for quite a while. She worked with children for a number of years, including in the Cromwell Public Schools as a special needs para-professional. Camosci, who moved to town from New Britain about 16 years ago, said the seeds for Tea Roses Tea Room were planted years ago.

"My mother lived in the Seattle, Wash., area for a couple years when I was in my early 20s and I flew out to visit her. We went to a small town called Kent. It has a little downtown which reminds me of downtown Cromwell. We were in an antique kind of shop," Camosci said.

She grew up on Lipton tea and Maxwell House coffee. The proprietor offered a cup of tea while they were browsing and at first she was suspicious.

"Then I realized she was just doing something really sweet. That was the first little seed," she said.

Next, the pair went to Vancouver, British Columbia, where they visited the Empress Hotel.

"In the lobby were the butlers and the waiters in their tuxes and their gloves preparing afternoon tea. My eyes bugged out of my head. I had never seen anything like that in my life," she said.

"When I got back to Connecticut after that visit, I couldn't wait to look up tea rooms. I did a search of tea rooms; this was back before the Internet. I brought my friends. I thought it was the greatest thing. You can just relax. You don't hurry tea. I love eating a variety of things. I love using beautiful china."

About 15 years before she opened Tea Roses Tea Room, which was named for a beloved great aunt, she began preparing by purchasing tea cups and putting them in her attic and taking classes.

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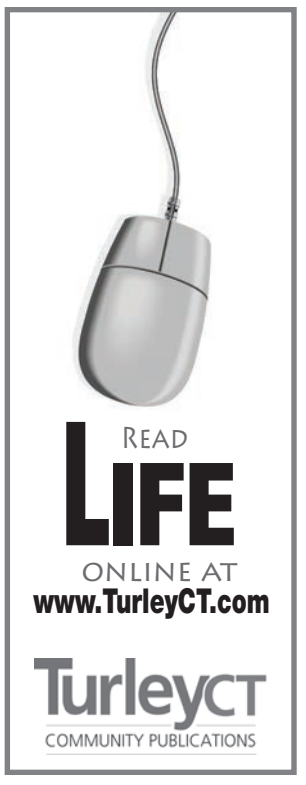

Chef Peggi Camosci answered 10 questions for more insight on her personality and know-how.

Q. What's your "secret weapon" ingredient?
A. My secret ingredient is love. I tell my customers that and my children believe it, too. They say whenever they make my recipes, it doesn't taste the same because my love was missing.

Q. What's your least favorite food?
A. Liver. My mother used to cook it. I just couldn't get past the smell.

Q. If you could take any celebrity chef out to dinner, who would it be and where would you take them?
A. Julia Child to a fancy French restaurant.

Q. What is your favorite cookbook of all time?
A. Betty Crocker's Home Cooking.

A. What is the one cooking technique that everyone should know how to do?
A. Be creative.

Q. If you weren't a chef, what profession would you be?
A. Inspirational speaker.

Q. What spice or herb best describes your personality?
A. Cinnamon. People who know me know that there is much more to me then sweetness. I can be spicy too, just like cinnamon.

Q. What's your "go to" staple recipe/dish?
A. Fresh salad with some kind of protein on top, some kind of fish or steak slices. I never get tired of it, and if I don't know what to have, that's what I'll have.

Q. What do you like to cook when having guests to your home?
A. Shrimp scampi. That's my signature.

Q. It's your last meal on earth. What's on your plate?
A. French baguette, fresh fruit and Champagne.

"During my 15-year journey, I took whatever courses I could at all of the community colleges, at culinary schools," Camosci said.

She would take day-long sessions on topics such as making soup or breads. She also worked with Brian O'Rourke from O'Rourke's Diner in Middletown and the late John Harney of Harney & Sons teas. She hired Pearl Dexter, founding editor of "Tea, A Magazine" as a consultant, and took a course in how to run a business.

"I had a good 15 years of preparation," she said.

Tea Roses Tea Room is done in the English style. One of the main attractions, of course, is the tea. The house blend is black tea, cinnamon stick, rose petals and vanilla bean.

"It is a place where you come to sit, sip and relax. It's not hurried. You can enjoy your time, enjoy your food, enjoy who you're with, although we do get people who come by themselves, just enjoy your experience," Camosci said.

"You feast with your eyes before you do with your stomach. Everyone looks at the beautiful presentation," she added.

The small tea room also has a gift shop with many items from local artists and authors.

"I have people come in the door, and they just go, 'ahhh.' They just feel relaxed. They just come to pay their bill, and say, 'I feel like I just had a massage.' If people come in and feel harried and hassled, I would say to my assistant, 'We'll have them smiling by the time they leave, and they always do. I transport people," Camosci said.

The shop is known for its afternoon tea, served on a three-tier tray. While the menu stays basically the same, she likes to add seasonal touches, such as pumpkin cranberry bread or an apple dessert.

In the beginning, she experimented with different types of scones. She eventually decided to stick with her signature vanilla cream heart-shaped scone, served with homemade lemon curd and double cream.

"It's all about sharing the love," she said.

Since opening in April 2010, "the menu expanded slightly and the hours have shortened," she said with a laugh.

"It's a lot of work running a business, especially a restaurant. I used to be open Tuesday through Saturday, but I found it only gave me Sunday with my husband. Monday had to be a work day. I had to do shopping and baking and preparing and book work," she said.

"After two years into it, I decided to close on Tuesdays. I haven't lost revenue. It's been wonderful. It was a great move. It gave me another day off. I didn't want to burn out. I want to do this as long as I can."

Camosci makes almost everything onsite, although she does get some soups from Picnic Basket Catering, just down the street. Whether it's for family or her customers, she loves to see people enjoy her food.

"That pleasure of seeing other people eating my food and loving it" is what brings her joy, she said.

She has two favorites on the menu.

"My favorite thing is afternoon tea because people's eyes pop when they see it and they just love it," she said. "Second best is the gourmet cheese plate. It just looks beautiful and if somebody was going to make it for me, that's what I'd order all the time."

Camosci believes in eating well.

"My philosophy is everything in moderation. Nothing should be off limits as long as it's in moderation," she said.

"Food is really one of my pleasures in life. I don't believe in denying yourself. I also like to think of eating as an event. I think of it as a celebration." **CL**

Tea Roses Tea Room, LLC, is located at 322 Main St. Call 860-632-1400 or visit tearosestearoom.com.

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LIFE MAGAZINE

Photo by Mark Jahne

Jay Polke is a longtime community volunteer and business leader.

A lifetime of service

Jay Polke continues to help the community he considers so special

by Mark Jahne
Editor

"Jay Polke is one of the finest individuals that we have in Middlesex County. He's just a great guy."

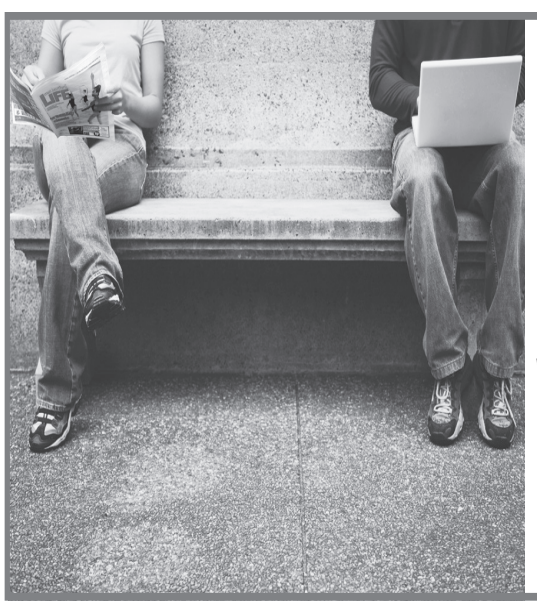
– Larry McHugh

Jay Polke likes to keep busy and enjoys his active role in the business and local community. He may be 74 years old, but he has no plans to retire anytime soon.

The accolades continue to roll in, but he takes them all graciously and in stride. He gets all the gratification he needs from helping other people.

Polke grew up in Port Chester, N.Y., and Greenwich. His father died when he was just 10 years old.

He co-owns the Willowbrook Spirit Shoppe in town with Chris Cambareri. The pair were honored with the Business Citizenship Award at last fall's second annual Mayor's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LIVING Your Best LIFE

Ball, put on by the Cromwell Merchants Association, of which he is a member.

"Prior to Chris being my business partner, his father was my business partner. I worked in a bowling alley in Port Chester," Polke said.

That's where he met Joe Cambareri back in 1957. Polke was a bowling alley mechanic and played a lot of the game himself. He was good enough that people sometimes bet on him. He eventually signed on to work with Joe.

"In September 1960 we opened a bowling alley in New Haven," he said.

Additional alleys in Hamden, Middletown and Cromwell soon followed before the two friends briefly went their separate professional ways.

"We operated Cromwell Lanes until 1964," he added. "I went on to operate the restaurant and bar at the Edgewood Golf Course."

That lasted until 1974. Edgewood eventually became today's TPC River Highlands. Because the two men remained friends, they reunited to open Willowbrook in 1975.

"We worked together until he died in 2000," Polke said.

That's when Chris Cambareri succeeded his father. In addition to being his close friend's son, the younger man is also Polke's godson.

Jay and Linda Polke have been married since 1965 and have two grown children, Jennifer and Jeffrey, and five grandchildren. She is active at the Cromwell Senior Center. All of the children and grandchildren attended the Cromwell Public Schools.

"I met my wife in the bowling alley in Cromwell," he recalled.

Polke serves on the executive board of the Middlesex Chamber of Commerce. He's also a member of its board of directors and is heavily involved in the chamber's Middlesex County Substance Abuse Action Council.

He has served as chairman of the chamber's Cromwell division for the past three years. Honors include receiving the Cromwell Man of the Year Award from the local Knights of Columbus chapter and the 2013 Distinguished Citizen of the Year Award from the Middlesex chamber. Polke is heavily involved with the CMA and holds a seat on the town Economic Development Commission. He served in the Army Reserve from 1964-70, including six months of active duty.

Larry McHugh, president of the Greater Middlesex Chamber of Commerce, had high praise for Polke.

"Jay Polke is one of the finest individuals that we have in Middlesex County. He's just a great guy," McHugh said.

He described Polke as the kind of person who never says no when asked to help and credits him with making the region a better place.

Rodney Bitgood, chairman of the merchants association, also had high praise for a man he says is always willing to step up and help.

"He does it out of a love for Cromwell. He's the town photographer, he's like a junior police officer," Bitgood said.

Polke assists the police any way he can. That included alerting them to the fact that surveillance cameras outside his store caught video images of the get-away car driven by a man who robbed the nearby Liberty Bank branch a few months ago.

Polke was teased at the Mayor's Ball that Police Chief Denise Lamontagne should give him some kind of honorary badge. Everyone who knows him had a good laugh at that.

"He's at the front of the line as far as [CMA] members. He's been there since day one," Bitgood added. "I consider Jay a mentor."

Whenever anything new is proposed, he said Polke always makes sure to ask people to assess whether or not it is good for the town.

"I try to get involved in as many fundraisers as possible. We're active in planning and zoning issues," Polke said of his business profile.

"I like the activity. It seems one thing gets finished and the next one gets started. I'm around town every day," he added.

"My daughter-in-law Heather and my son Jeffrey run the farmers market. I take care of the music for them." **CL**

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LIFE of E's

Senior pets add spice

My husband and I moved to Cromwell in September 2014, bringing with us the last member of our cat family. We sent our boy, Luke, to the Rainbow Bridge that January and spent the next year without a pet in our household.

My first four cats were females, adopted in pairs from local shelters, first in New Jersey and then in Rhode Island. Luke belonged to a neighbor before he adopted us; he was about 7 at the time. Your brain can make all the logical arguments it wants about keeping retirement life simple, but when you've had at least one cat in your home for almost 40 years, your heart has a mind of its own.

About a year ago, I began to consider adoption, but I didn't want to start over with kittens that might be left without a home if they outlived me. I spent many hours on the Internet looking at cats whose aging owners had either died or been forced to give them up. More often than not, these felines are seniors themselves, making them difficult to place. Visit a local shelter any Saturday morning and you'll see clusters of families fawning over the kittens. The cats that are "long in the tooth" are often ignored.

Since I wanted two cats again, I chose an organization that had several seniors awaiting placement. It's the Protectors of Animals in East Hartford.

In January of this year, POA opened an affordable spay/neuter clinic. Their goal is to dramatically reduce the number of unwanted litters in the Greater Hartford area. I support that effort not just for the obvious reasons. When you stem the flow of kittens upstream, more families will consider adopting older pets downstream. It's like trickle-down economics in the animal world.

We adopted 10-year-old Kallie through POA in March 2016. She's a calico and tortoise combination, quiet and gentle. Her former owner is now in a nursing home. In fairly short time, she began sleeping with me, much as Luke did in his last years. When I'm stretched out trying to work, she tries to perch on my chest in front of my laptop. Kallie may be quiet, but she does not like to be ignored.

In April we added 7-year-old Stella—not quite a senior, but getting on in years. She's a torbie—a tiger and calico combination. Her original owner is likewise in a nursing home now. Stella is a talker and she's as energetic as Kallie is calm.

Stella has turned out to be quite a character. I was told to avoid giving her catnip because it gets her "over-stimulated."

It wasn't the catnip; it's just Stella.

During the day she naps a lot. She's tried just about every piece of furniture and I don't think there's any that she doesn't like if the sun is right.

Soon after we brought Stella home, we discovered that she enjoys "hunting" throughout the night. She goes to the end of the loft area where my bear collection is displayed in wooden crates. One by one she selects her prey and carries it in her mouth down the stairs from the loft. All the while, she emits her strange hunting meow. She deposits each animal, usually at the foot of the stairs. Then, she goes back up to stalk another one.

I've taken to sleeping with earplugs, since the hunting noises are surprisingly loud and seem to go on for hours. In the morning, I pick up the bodies and put them back in their display. It's not all bad: I get good exercise from the two or three trips that it takes to bring them back to the loft.

In an effort to preserve my own collection, I bought Stella several small stuffed animals—without catnip in them.

She now has over a dozen critters. In addition to the predictable mice and rabbits, there's a cheetah, a duck, two sheep, a skunk, two bears of her own and a turquoise fish with spongy spines. I had hoped she'd leave my bears alone. Fat chance. One morning there were fourteen stuffies scattered about. Six of them were Stella's; the rest were mine. I've actually had to mend the limbs on several of her prey. You read this correctly. I'm spending my retirement stitching up the bodies that she dismembers.

Stella has taught her sister how to hunt. A reminder that Kallie was the quiet one—virtually silent. Now when I hear a hunting meow in the early evening, it's just as likely to be Kallie carrying around one of their animal print mice.

The two of them are so adorable, it's impossible to be upset with any of this. If my bears are still fair game, so what? The pleasure that these senior cats are bringing to their senior parents is worth every slobbered up stuffie that we step on barefoot in the morning. CL

Elaine M. Decker's books—Retirement Sparks Redux, Retirement Sparks Again, Retirement Sparks and CANCER: A Coping Guide—are on Amazon.com, including Kindle editions. One of her essays appears in the anthology: 70 Things To Do When You Turn 70. Contact her at: emdecker@ix.netcom.com.

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‘Part of the family’

Cromwell recreation director retires after 30 years in position

by Mara Dresner
Staff Writer

Rocky Hill resident Susan Schein recently retired after serving 30 years as Cromwell’s recreation director. She got into the field after taking a personality test.

Susan Schein of Rocky Hill, who recently retired after 30 years with the Cromwell Recreation & Youth Services Department, didn’t set out to have a career in that field. She didn’t even know it was a possibility.

“I was in my sophomore year of college. I was a history major and I said, ‘Now what do I want to do?’ I didn’t want to be a history teacher. I don’t know why. And I didn’t know what else to do with history,” Schein, who grew up on Long Island, remembered.

She met with a career counselor at her school, State University of New York at Geneseo, who gave her a personality test. The two careers that were the best fit were physical education teacher “or this degree called recreation. I found out about that. It sounded good to me. It sounded like something I would truly enjoy,” she said.

“The town I grew up in didn’t have a recreation department. I had spent a lot of summers in summer camps. I had worked as a camp counselor. I actually had this background, but I didn’t know there was a field called recreation when I was looking for colleges.”

SUNY didn’t offer the major so Schein transferred to Slippery Rock State College (now University) in Pennsylvania, which offered a degree in community recreation.

She began volunteering while she was a student, helping to run programs, and worked for the town of Slippery Rock for three years after she graduated until the town no longer got the grant that paid her salary.

“The town was a very small town. They couldn’t afford two recreation professionals,” she said.

While she was pondering her next move, her sister, who was living in the Boston area, got pregnant.

“I decided I’d like to be part of their lives, so I start looking for jobs in New England. I got a job with the Haddam-Killingworth Recreation Department. I was with them for five years as the assistant director, and then in 1986, the town of Cromwell decided to go from a part-time recreation director to a full-time director and they hired me as their first full-time recreation director,” Schein said.

The department was quite different when she started 30 years ago.

“They had quite a few programs but nothing was tied together as a department. Everything was run by volunteers who were all doing their own thing. It was a matter of sitting down, figuring out what everyone was doing and how to pull it together and tweak what they were doing,” she said.

“The town had some pretty good things, the youth soccer league, the youth basketball league. It was just a matter of tweaking,” she added. “I wasn’t starting from complete scratch, but pulling it all together and adding more and making it a department.”

The department now has two full-time professionals, as well as two part-time employees, and a number of seasonal people who work in the summer.

“Now that I’m no longer working, I can become a mentor, which I’m really looking forward to.”
– Susan Schein

“[They’re] working alongside the paid staff, working with kids, learning responsibilities and taking the next step in their growth. It’s one of the programs I’m extremely proud of adding,” she said.

“That’s the biggest change in number of people. When I started we were having a drop-in type summer program. There were two or three staff members. Last year, there were 33 people on staff. We averaged 250 kids a day, preschoolers through entering grade 8,” Schein said.

“We’ve added cooking programs for kids. That has always been one of the popular ones. We’ve added a lot more arts and crafts. In the summer months, we’ve brought in a lot of specialty camps. It’s not only in sports but LEGOs, mad science, and this past summer, we brought in modeling.”

Another program Schein added is a junior counselor program for high school students. About 50 students take part in the program, some for one week, others for the entire season.

That program is for students entering grades 9 and 10. Students must apply for the positions and go through an interview process.

““It’s a win-win-win for everybody. Parents loved it because it gave their kids some place to go. The recreation department loved it because we got additional staff and it gave us additional eyes on the children, and they got more and better care, and the junior staff kids loved it,” Schein said.

“They realized they were role models and somebody looked up to them and someone valued them for what they offered to others in the community.”

The department offers programs from preschool children through adults.

“Our big summer concert series has grown,” she said of the Wednesday night series. “It’s very popular. We’ve really diversified the offerings so we’re not just sports oriented. We’re trying to meet as many leisure needs for as many different residents as possible.”

Her influence was felt throughout the town, whether it was helping bring the football program to the high school or working to help build the playground at Pierson Park.

“I felt most proud of building all of the bridges in the community.

I felt people appreciated that," she said. "The community thought we were doing most things right and looked to us as a resource in the community."

That included getting calls asking their opinion about various programs or looking for information about who to contact for other services. She also enjoyed working with the scouting program in town.

Sometimes she and her staff helped guide parents to what's best for their children – even if that's not a parks and rec program.

"The field has changed a lot, particularly in the youth sports area, in that there are so many more travel programs. All we do is coordinate the fields. We're giving way to them and just assisting them, how they might need it, instead of being the only avenue," she added.

"We try to help parents make a choice that is best for them. We try to give parents an honest view of both the Recreation Department programs and all the travel programs. We're trying to deal with all the private programs and not step on the toes of private agencies," Schein said.

That's one of the reasons the department doesn't offer dance lessons, even though it has had requests for them.

"There are numerous dance studios in Cromwell. We could have undercut them and we didn't want to step on their toes when they are experts in the field. We wanted to stay on good terms with all of those people and work with them," she said.

"I always felt we were there to support the community and not just Cromwell recreation. Even though it's growing and a lot bigger than when I first started, the community is bigger than us."

Schein, who retired at the end of October, was the recipient of the Humanitarian Award at the Second Annual Cromwell Mayor's Ball.

"She was more than just the recreation and youth director. She was part of the community, part of the family of all of the kids who participated in the programs. She has a huge heart and a great spirit, and we thank her for everything she did to help enrich our town," Mayor Enzo Faienza said.

Schein also worked closely with local merchants.

"Sue was an amazing woman. Sue always put the kids first. She was an active participant in the CMA, whether it was helping set up for our Memorial Day car show or coming up with ideas that would spark the children's interest at our Halloween event. She would do whatever to benefit the kids. She will truly be missed," Cara Ehlers said.

Ehlers is vice-chairman of the Cromwell Merchants Association.

Just because she's retired doesn't mean that Schein has a lot of free time on her hands. She's been volunteering at The Bushnell for more than 17 years and plans to expand her efforts there. She's also co-chairman of the Cromwell Prevention and Awareness Council.

"We're working on bringing a mentoring program to Woodside Intermediate School. I've been very busy with that. We're trying to get more residents to become mentors. We'll be doing training and getting started right away," she said.

"Now that I'm no longer working, I can become a mentor, which I'm really looking forward to."

She's also starting a part-time job working with bowling alleys to bring bowling into schools, recreation departments, YMCAs and other youth-oriented venues.

"It's not only to have the equipment to run in the facility, but to have the kids come to the bowling lanes themselves. The program is designed not to be just about bowling. The curriculum can be integrated into other classrooms; the obvious one is math," she said.

"One group is actually using it in their science program. It's more than just the bowling. So many kids today are not involved in lifetime sports, they're only involved in team sports. It's important to introduce them to lifetime sports."

She's also planning to look for other volunteer opportunities, perhaps at Manes & Motion Therapeutic Riding Center in Middletown.

She misses certain aspects of her job, especially the people.

"We were all together for a long time. The residents are phenomenal. They're just a great group of people in the community. They step up and volunteer. They'll help anybody in the community, not just the rec department," Schein said.

"I gained so much more at some of these programs than they did. Over 30 years, you watch children grow from young children to college to parents. Watching that and all the support I've gotten really touched me," she added.

"When I show up in the community and people come up and they're thanking me, that means the world to me." **CL**

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People notes

Samuel Shagan earned high honors for the first marking period from the University High School of Science and Engineering, an all-honors STEM and Early College Model Magnet School on the University of Hartford campus. **Eren Sevimli** and **Serra Sevimli** earned honors.

Amina Cecunjanin, Avalon Dieli and **Artur Stolstajner** were named to the dean's list at Tunxis Community College.

Michael Amato, Daniel Ambler, Jessica Barber, Paul Campbell, Zachary Ellish, Joseph Esposito, Amy Fasciano, Brian Goldstein, Amanda Hermann, Md Khursidul Islam, Holly Linder, Elena Masiello, Irfan Mridha, Karl Douglass Mueller, Shannon O'Rourke, Nichole Pitzuzzello, Alexander Ramirez, Caitlin Savinelli, Justin Slifer and **Lauren Tracey** were named to the dean's list at the University of Connecticut.

Melanie Davenport recently graduated from Southern Connecticut State University, magna cum laude, with a bachelor's degree in therapeutic recreation. She is now working towards her master's degree. **CL**

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News roundup

Stop & Shop evacuated

The Cromwell Police Department responded to a threatening incident shortly after 4 p.m. Feb. 10 at Stop & Shop, 195 West St. Out of precaution, store management temporarily evacuated the building.

Local officers, with assistance from the Connecticut State Police, conducted a search of the premises. Once it was determined that the building was safe it reopened for business and employees and customers were allowed back inside.

The incident was determined to be an isolated matter. Chief Denise Lamontagne said the Cromwell Police Department takes any threat seriously and the safety of the public is of her utmost concern.

Knights support recreation

Cromwell Knights of Columbus members John Croasdale, Don Anderson and Mike Parent hand donations to Cromwell Recreation Director Chris Rusack.

These checks represent the proceeds from the Knights recent Tootsie Roll drive and money went to Camp Sunshine, Manes in Motion and the Miracle League, all organizations that help children with developmental disabilities and their families.

Sign up for adult education

Free high school completion programs are offered to Cromwell and Rocky Hill residents at 398 Main St. in Middletown. English as a second language classes are held in Rocky Hill and Middletown.

Come and learn about the three ways you can earn a diploma. Day and evening classes are available, enrollment is ongoing and there is never a charge for these Board of Education programs. Call 860-343-6044 to enroll.

Knights support MARC

Cromwell Knights of Columbus Deputy Grand Knight Michael Parent presents a check to support MARC. Donnalynn Notaro, vice president of human resources, gratefully accept the charitable donation. **CL**

Knights support MARC

Knights support recreation

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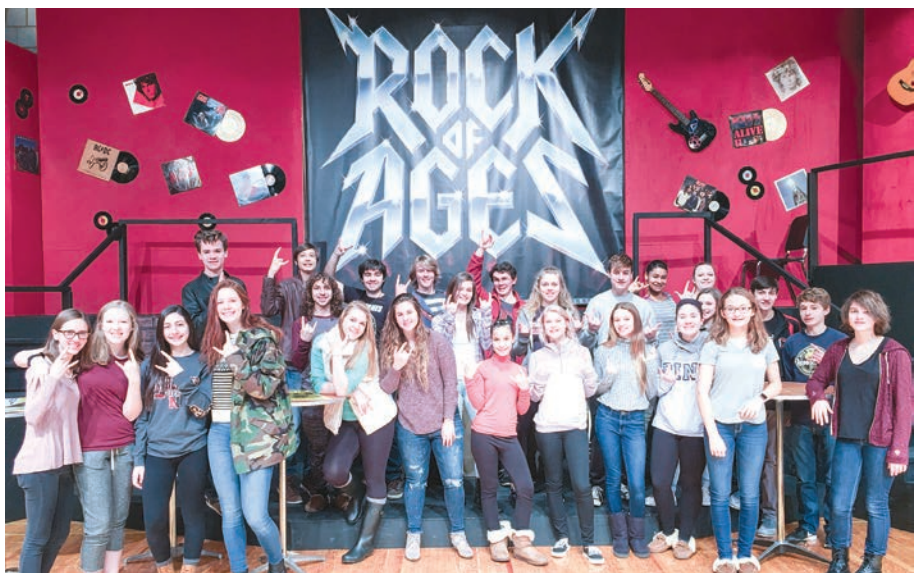

"Rock of Ages"

March 9-12

Cromwell High School, 860-632-4841 ext. 14813

The CHS Drama Club brings the audience back to 1987 with this jukebox musical that is the ultimate celebration of 1980s rock culture with no shortage of hair spray, leather and spandex. The auditorium will be transformed into the legendary Bourbon Room located on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles. The production directed by Raymond J. Sinclair II and choreographed by Brian Destin will include hit songs by glam metal bands including Whitesnake, Bon Jovi, Styx, Poison, REO Speedwagon, Europe, Pat Benatar, Twisted Sister, Journey and more. Tickets are $15 in advance and available online only at showtix4u.com or $20 at the door. Show times are 7 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday.

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Events *spotlight*

Lenten Mission

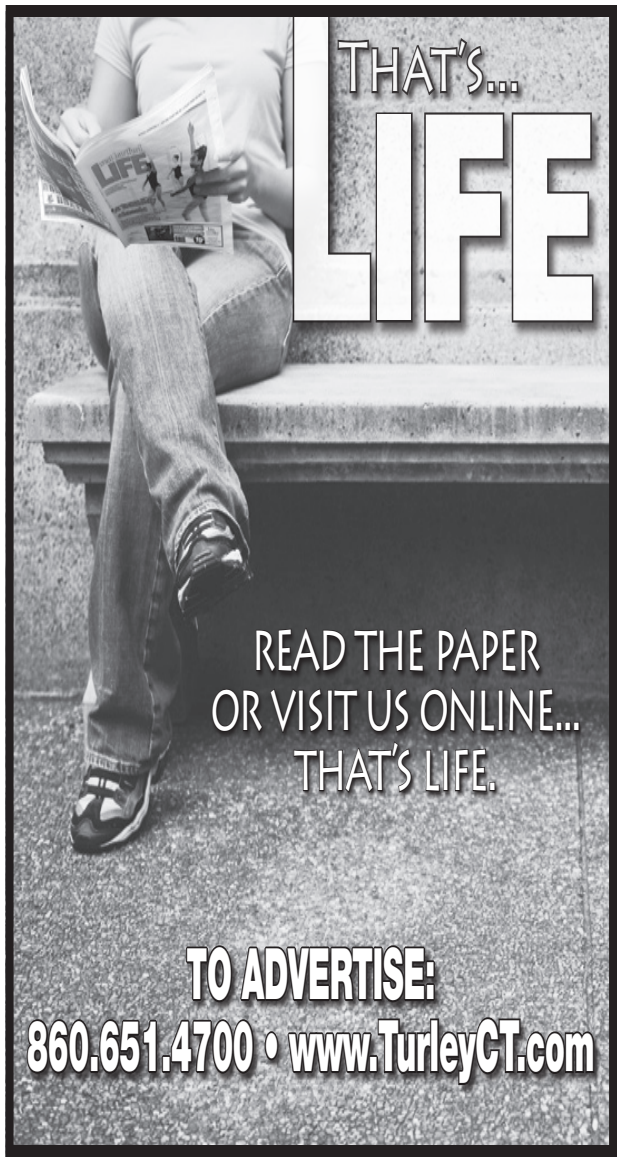
March 12-14

St. John Catholic Church

5 St. John Court

860-635-5590

"Growing Pains: The Demand of Our Lenten Journey – Truth, Courage and Love" is the name of this free three-evening retreat featuring the mother/daughter team of Carol and Kristen Kurivial. It includes the musical interpretation of a Biblical character who walked the Passion with Jesus. The program starts at 6 p.m. March 12 and 7 p.m. the other two evenings.



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Slice of LIFE

photos by Mark Jahne

A winter art project

1. Garvita Singh creates her drawing in a circular pattern during a snowflake art program at the Cromwell Belden Library. **2.** Lily Lockany and Christian Cicero are focused upon their artwork. **3.** Library staff member Sara Bartelmo adds the magic ingredient to the drawings, spraying water to make the color from the pieces of tissue melt onto the paper. **4.** Shean Lockany attaches pieces of colorful tissue paper to his drawing to make the snowflakes.

Has its time come?

Antonio Guerrera seeks support for electronic tolls on two major highways

by Mark Jahne
Editor

At a time when the state seems to be hemorrhaging money, state Rep. Antonio "Tony" Guerrera sees a mountain of cash primed for the taking. He sees millions of dollars of potential revenue driving on state highways every day.

Guerrera is the co-chairman of the state legislature's transportation committee. His district covers Rocky Hill and portions of Newington and Wethersfield.

He has long been an advocate of returning highway tolls to Connecticut. There used to be toll booths on I-95, the Merritt Parkway, and several Hartford area bridges including Bissell, Charter Oak and Putnam, among other locations.

Those booths disappeared following a fiery crash at a toll plaza in Stratford in January 1983 when a truck driver allegedly fell asleep at the wheel and slammed into a line of traffic waiting to pay the toll.

Seven people died in an inferno that left blackened vehicles scattered all around the scene. Within a few years, all of the toll booths in the state were gone. So was all the money they produced.

Technology has changed over the past three decades and those states that collect tolls these days do it by electronic means rather than at concrete plazas along the road. It's much safer and less annoying to motorists and Guerrera is confident it's the way to go.

He started calling for electronic tolls five years ago and was a lone voice in the wilderness. Not anymore. He said legislators from both sides of the aisle are speaking with him about their increasing interest in his plan.

He admits to being a car buff and said that is what originally got him thinking about this topic. The state has for many decades relied upon its gasoline tax – one of the highest in the nation – to provide the funds to maintain its bridges, highways and other transportation infrastructure.

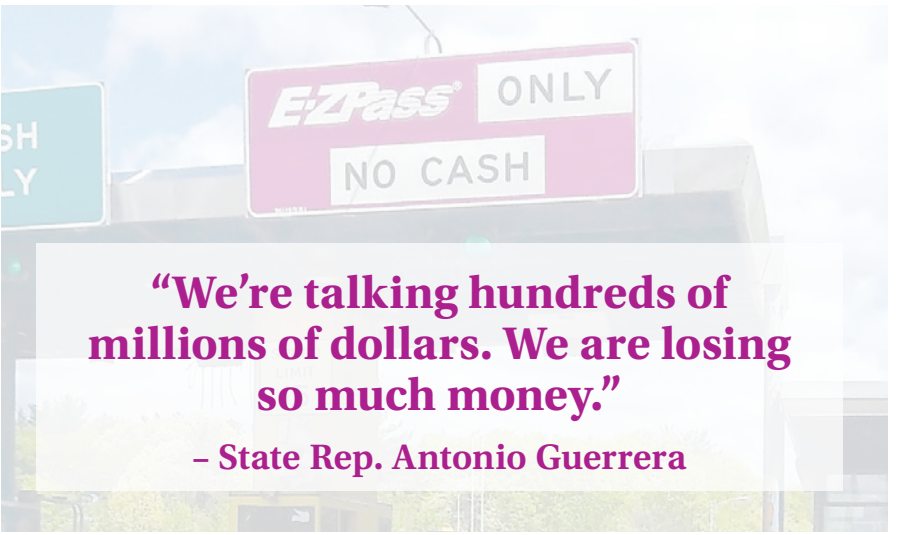
According to the American Petroleum Institute, Connecticut charges 39.85 cents in combined taxes per gallon of gas. Add on the 18.40 cents per gallon of federal excise tax and it costs motorists more than 58 cents in taxes to purchase one gallon of gasoline.

Modern cars are either all electric, hybrid or much more fuel efficient than even the recent past. That means drivers are buying less gasoline and the gas tax revenue is steadily dropping. Another means has to be found to find needed transportation money.

"We can't support our roads and bridges through the gas tax," Guerrera said. "The feds haven't raised the federal gas tax since 1993."

He smiled as he recalled the early years of his electronic toll campaign.

"When I first started they looked at me like, what are you doing? The momentum is changing," he said.



"We're talking hundreds of millions of dollars. We are losing so much money."

– State Rep. Antonio Guerrera

Now, one by one, fellow legislators are coming to realize that the days of the gas tax being a prime source of state revenue are over.

He has already researched whether Connecticut would lose federal funding if it reinstituted tolls and the answer is no. Several other northeastern and mid-Atlantic states already have electronic tolls. Massachusetts recently replaced its toll plazas along the Massachusetts Turnpike with such a system.

Those who regularly use the highways can buy a transponder and load money on it. Each time they pass under what is called a gantry holding a scanning device, the appropriate amount of money would be deducted from their account.

Those who do not want a transponder can simply drive the highways the way they always have. The scanners would capture the data from their car as it passes beneath them and a bill would be mailed.

This billing data would be linked to the state Department of Motor Vehicles and entered into a reciprocal agreement with DMVs in other states. Failure to pay would result in rejection the next time the vehicle is due for registration or the owner for license renewal, the same system that exists now for those who don't pay their property taxes.

He is confident that because the cost would be low, most people would readily pay.

"The best part of this is, if we can implement this, we can start to lower the gas tax," Guerrera said.

There is also a great deal of money that could be generated from truckers and other through traffic.

"Thirty percent to 40 percent of people who travel on our interstates are from out of state," he added.

Connecticut residents would receive a discounted rate on the tolls in his proposal. He would also like people to be able to write off the cost of these tolls on their state income tax.

File photo

Rep. Antonio Guerrera

Guerrera proposes that the tolls be limited to two interstate highways: I-84 and I-95. At the recent State of the Town breakfast in Wethersfield, he called the amount of money that could be raised astronomical.

"That's huge. We're talking hundreds of millions of dollars. We are losing so much money," he said. "If we don't do it now … we're already behind the 8-Ball."

State government sometimes draws money from its general fund to cover transportation needs. It would no longer have to do that if electronic tolls are installed.

Guerrera wants this money to go into a legally mandated lockbox so that it can only be used for transportation infrastructure and cannot be raided for other uses. He estimates that as much as 92 cents of every dollar collected would be profit.

"Our roads and our bridges are in bad shape. We need to be proactive," he said.

"The bottom line is a reduced gas tax, in-state discounts for Connecticut residents and millions of dollars to fix our infrastructure." **CL**

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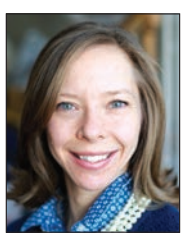
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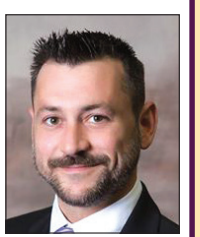
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Editorial

What to do about Hartford's fiscal woes?

Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin has toured several central Connecticut suburbs seeking any support he can find for his financially ailing city. It's been a hard sell, but he knew that would be the case from the outset.

The city is facing a $50 million budget shortfall that is projected to increase to $70 million or more next year. There are several reasons for this.

Prior mayors and City Councils practiced reckless and irresponsible spending. They borrowed too much. They entered into questionable projects, the prime example being the Dunkin' Donuts minor league baseball stadium.

They negotiated contracts that, in some instances, paid outrageously high pensions to retired city employees. It should be noted that this is no longer the case.

When debt came due, they renegotiated that fiscal responsibility in a dangerous manner and did what the politicians in Washington, D.C., do all the time – kicked the can down the road. The problem now is the road has reached an end and the can cannot be kicked any further.

The primary source of the problem is Connecticut's heavy reliance on the property tax to fund municipal budgets, more than any other state. This system works much better in a rural or suburban environment than it does in an urban community.

More than half of the land in Hartford is tax-exempt: state buildings, hospitals, colleges and more. The city is supposed to recoup a portion of that tax value through a program called PILOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) but state government has not fully funded that for years.

It's a recipe for disaster and that's exactly what is staring Bronin and other city leaders in the face.

He does have options, but they range from bad to terrible. He has taken admirable steps to stem the tide of red ink, but the numbers show that simply raising taxes or cutting spending to the bone will not solve the problem.

The city's tax rate is already 74 mills. That heavy burden has driven out many small and even medium-sized businesses. Why should they stay in Hartford when they can relocate to a suburb where the mill rate is in the 30s or low 40s?

Bankruptcy is one of his options, but that would have harmful ripple effects on all of the other cities and towns in central Connecticut. Businesses will either leave or decline to locate here. Jobs will be lost. Homes will face foreclosure.

The best possible solutions are an increase in PILOT money, a share of the state's sales tax – not just for Hartford, but for all 169 cities and towns – or a change in the property tax dependency.

But in a year when state government is trying to solve a more than $1 billion deficit of its own, that's a tall order. The next few months will reveal how much the state can, or is willing, to help Hartford and its other major cities. **CL**

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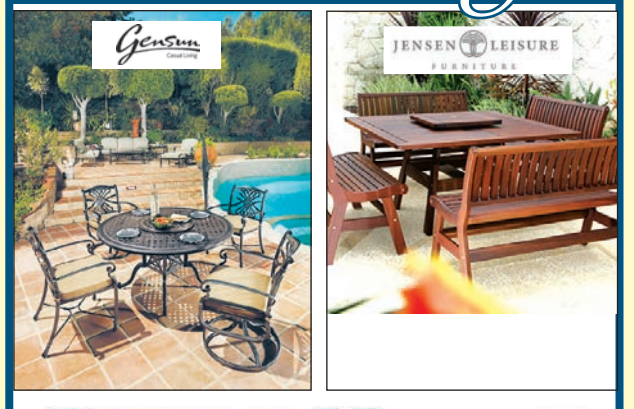

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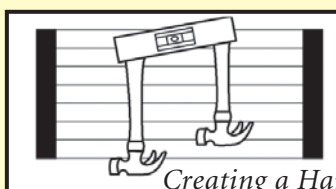

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BY MARK DIXON
WFSB METEOROLOGIST [AMS]

In like a lion, out like a lamb?

The month of March is one that can be beautiful, but also quite volatile here in Connecticut.

When it comes to temperature – on the first day of the month 24 degrees is the average low, 42 is the average high. By the end of the month, the average low goes up to 33 while the high warms to 54. Not a bad, as we transition from winter to spring, officially on the 20th (at 6:29 a.m.) with the Vernal Equinox. When it comes to the extremes of the month, the coldest temperature was achieved in 1967 and 2003 when the low was -6 (on the 19th and 7th, respectively).

Also since records have been kept, for the Greater Hartford Area, 89 degrees is the warmest it has been – on the 31st in 1998.

When it comes to snow, March is historically a month featuring some of the more notable storms. Take for instance the Blizzard of 1888, over 50 inches of snow fell in Middletown. Then more recently, there was the Storm of the Century (Storm Josh), on the 13th in 1993. An event that brought over a foot of snow, a lot of sleet, and a strong wind. So by no means are we immune to the bigger ones, but the average (based on a 30 year timespan) is just 6.4 inches. **CL**

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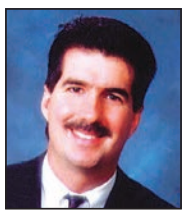

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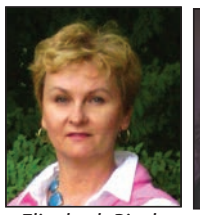

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